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My Learning Story

"You have your way. I have my way. As for the right way, the correct way, and the only way, it does not exist" (Friedrich Nietzsche).

Many people enter college unsure of what they want to do. I came to Wheelock with great drive and enthusiasm to become a teacher. There was no doubt in my mind that this is what I was supposed to do; this is what I was meant to be. I had wanted to be a teacher since second grade and my mind never wandered from my destined path. However, after volunteering in the special education program at my high school I decided that not only was I meant to be a teacher; I was meant to be a special education teacher.

When beginning the college search I came across Wheelock. I knew that this was the school for me. It was a small school dedicated to helping children and their families. Coming from a small town I felt that I wanted and needed this small school atmosphere. Intimate class sizes and direct relationships with teachers was something I couldn't fathom learning without. I was disappointed to realize that Wheelock did not have a special education program at the undergrad level. However, I still knew that Wheelock was the school I belonged at. So, I applied planning on getting my bachelors in elementary education and going straight to graduate school for my Master's in special education. The end of my freshman year at Wheelock, my plans changed. I was ecstatic to discover that Wheelock was implementing a special education bachelors program. I immediately met with the professors creating the program and enrolled as soon

as possible. I started my sophomore year as a proud member of the new special education program.

Although I came to Wheelock with the eagerness to become a teacher, I do not think I quite understood the complexity of the profession. I entered college believing that good teachers had big hearts. Although I still feel extremely passionate about this notion, I have now developed additional philosophies that will forever affect who I am as a teacher and I know now that I will continue to build upon my existing knowledge and beliefs as I grow as an educator.

To prepare in writing a paper that displays all that I have come to believe about teaching, I began to look back upon all the work I have done for my Special Education concentration here at Wheelock. I wanted to find a theme that was relevant within all my assignments; however I didn't realize how difficult that would be. When looking back on my work I was surprised and pleased with how professional and thought provoking my work was. I had touched upon so many theories, philosophies and strategies that I believe are imperative in the world of teaching. How could I classify all of these amazing ideas into one statement? Although I was finding this difficult, I was also feeling encouraged. So, I took a step back and worked on something else. While reading an article I came across the word *individualization* and that is when it hit me. That was all I needed, to see that word, and it sparked a realization. I went back and looked at my work again and I realized that throughout all I have done being concerned with the individual has always been a key priority of mine. Of course this isn't

like a puzzle where everything fits perfectly together, but I do believe that loosely my work displays my true passion for teaching each student as an individual.

By individualism I mean that each student in my classroom has a voice. Each voice will be heard and respected. This correlates with John Dewey's theory of open-mindedness that I discussed in my philosophy statement. I realize that there is not one correct way to do things. By valuing the individual I will encourage students' views and thoughts. Each individual will have an impact on my classroom, my teaching and their peers. Individual learning styles and interests will be critical in the development of curriculum and activities. Special accommodations needed, different languages and cultural backgrounds will be respected and embraced. Each student will be valued for who they are individually and what makes them unique and extraordinary.

Another theory I discussed in my philosophy that supports individualism is Nel Nodding's notion of care. Taking an interest in students individually shows them that you care about them, as a learner and as a person. This notion of care assures that no students "blends in". It is important for a teacher to respect each child and care about each child individually so that they get their own sense of individuality and independence as well as the feeling of being supported.

This idea of individualism as it is related to care is also intertwined with culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally relevant pedagogy is using the individual's cultural orientations, background experiences and ethnic identities

to facilitate teaching and aid in learning (Gay, 2002). I feel this is a very important part of respecting an individual. By teaching using a culturally relevant pedagogy you are assuring the child that differences in background and ethnicity are wonderful parts of people that they can bring to their learning. You are encouraging them that it is okay to be who they are and that at least in your classroom individuals will be valued and not stereotyped.

During my Self Study, I focused on one kindergarten boy, Jake. Jake was having difficulty focusing on his work and staying on task and he required strategies to help him succeed with completing his class work. By focusing on Jake as an individual I was able to see what accommodations would be helpful to him. I didn't just try a fix it all solution to help Jake, rather I really considered his personality, interests and difficulties when developing a plan. I looked at theorist Mel Levine's work and realized that brief motor breaks for redirecting attention controls could be something that would work for Jake. But I knew that if I took Jake out of his seat he would never get back. So, I adapted these motor breaks and decided on giving Jake motor breaks of thumb wars so he was still sitting at his desk and then redirecting him to his work became more simple. For some children this may have not been enough of a motor break. But for Jake it was and we noticed that he was then able to not only complete his work, but really understand the meaning of lessons and produce high quality work.

I believe that children are like snowflakes, each one beautiful and yet each one very different. Embracing individuality gives children the chance to shine

and display their strengths while not being afraid of their weaknesses.

Supporting individuality creates a positive environment where children feel respected and appreciated. As a teacher I am still learning. I know that my students will have so much to teach me. By valuing their individuality, I feel my students will teach me some of the most important lessons I will need to learn. We are not all made out of one standard mold and that is wonderful.

I feel this theme of individualism portrays my goals and views as an aspiring teacher. Because I was able to enroll in the special education program at the undergraduate level, I am going to go straight to a career before I begin my masters. This was a hard decision for me. I know that I must be working on my masters degree within five years, so part of me felt I should just go and do it while I am still in the "school mode". However, over the past few years my eyes have been opened to how broad the field of special education is. I am graduating positive that I want to work in special education, yet unsure of what section of the field interests me the most. Part of me wants to get my masters in severe special education while part of me wants to look into something more specialized such as teacher for the Deaf, or recreation therapist. There is so much I want to do. So, I felt it would be best to actually get out in the real world, get some experience and see if that leads me in my next direction.

Currently I am waiting for a call back from an interview I completed a couple of weeks ago. My dreams of becoming a teacher were always intertwined with teaching in the same district in which I grew up in. I had such a wonderful

experience in school and in my community. I have strong ties to my hometown and I have no doubt it will become the place in which I settle down and raise a family. Because of this I want to give back to the community that gave so much to me. The job I am in the process of applying for is in this district working with children with Autism. Although this district holds a special place in my heart with personal and community connections, it is a much different world than I have experienced in my student teaching in the Boston area. My home is not very culturally or ethnically diverse. The majority of children come from white middle class homes. My reasoning for wanting to work in this setting has nothing to do with escaping diversity. In fact I will greatly miss the multicultural facet that I became accustomed to in my college experiences. However, this small town I am so used to is currently growing. I believe that all areas are becoming more diverse, and it is only a matter of time before the Triton district develops. I would look forward to being there to incorporate new teaching strategies and techniques to celebrate diversity.

I am currently on a rollercoaster of emotions about moving on to the next phase of my life. Although I am excited and ready to conquer the world of teaching, this feeling is accompanied by a bundle of nerves. I look forward to see what the future brings me. My time at Wheelock has assured me that I am heading in the direction and am prepared to find the path I was destined to travel.

References:

Gay, G. (2002). Culturally responsive teaching in special education for ethnically diverse students: Setting the stage. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 15(6), 613-629. Retrieved April 18, 2008, from Educators Reference database.